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SUBJECT: UKRAINE: PRE-ELECTION PROVINCIAL SNAPSHOT:

CHERNIHIV THEN AND NOW

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11. (SBU) Summary: The north-central province of Chernihiv offers a snapshot of the changed Ukraine and of the fluid political dynamics between the 2004 Presidential contest and the upcoming March parliamentary (Rada) and local elections. In 2004, Chernihiv witnessed heavy administrative resource abuses, the planting of "bombs" to compromise pro-democracy NGO "PORA!" activists, and the only known incident of official violence against "Orange Revolution" protesters nationwide, while eventually delivering 71 percent of its vote to Yushchenko. In 2005, local activism flourished; Our Ukraine-affiliated governor Vladyslav Atroshenko was forced from office due to localized protests against his alleged misdeeds, and the provincial Our Ukraine organization subsequently resisted national party efforts to include Atroshenko on the provincial party list. In the run-up to the 2006 elections, there are no complaints about administrative resource abuses; the media environment is unfettered, and the province's votes appear up for grabs, with Our Ukraine, the Tymoshenko bloc (BYuT), the Socialists, Regions, and Communists likely to split the vote, leading to likely coalition arrangements in the provincial and district councils. End summary.

2004 -- Then: Planted evidence and violence

12. (SBU) In the run-up to the 2004 Presidential elections, Chernihiv's Governor Melnychuk, an SPDU(o) ally of Kuchma Chief of Staff Medvedchuk, facilitated heavy administrative resource abuses, including pressure on government and enterprise workers to vote for PM Yanukovych, media harassment, and the planting of a fake "bomb" in the apartment of a PORA! activist, the only place outside Kiev that the police planted such evidence in justifying wide-scale anti-PORA raids on trumped-up terrorism charges in late October 2004 (reftel). When 10,000 "Orange" protesters gathered in Chernihiv's main square after the falsified November 21 second round of elections and before the December 26 re-run, police used tear gas and percussion grenades in an attempt to disperse the crowd, sending 30 citizens to the hospital in the only apparent incident across Ukraine during the Orange Revolution of law enforcement officials using violence against a large group of peaceful demonstrators.

2005 -- Local activism brings down a governor

13. (SBU) Chernihiv's PORA activists continued to agitate after Yushchenko came to power and appointed as governor his Presidential Campaign Chair for Chernihiv, local businessman Vladyslav Atroshenko (b. 1968). Atroshenko ran afoul of both PORA activist Valeriy Borovyk and Rada Chair of the Committee to Combat Organized Crime Volodymyr Stretovych (Our Ukraine electoral bloc). Borovyk accused Atroshenko of embezzling funds from the 2002 Our Ukraine parliamentary campaign (note: the accusations were mutual); local protesters picketing the governor's office also cited a traffic accident, in which a trail car from Atroshenko's entourage killed a bystander, in calling for Atroshenko's removal. Stretovych implicated Atroshenko in a shady privatization deal in Chernihiv; Atroshenko countered by claiming that Stretovych had his own business interests in Chernihiv that he was attempting to boost by scheming for Atroshenko's ouster. In the end, Yushchenko dismissed Atroshenko December 12, 2005, moving Sumy governor Mykola Lavryk to Chernihiv.

14. (SBU) In a further sign of local political muscle flexing, Our Ukraine's Chernihiv provincial party organization subsequently resisted Our Ukraine's national party headquarters' attempt to place Atroshenko high on the party's provincial list, Committee of Voters of Ukraine (CVU) Chernihiv head Oleksander Solomakha told us February 13. Listed at 101 on Our Ukraine's national list, Atroshenko is on the bubble to make it into the national Rada (Our Ukraine would have to receive 23 percent of the Rada's 450 seats).

2006 -- Now: Unfettered competition, province up for grabs

15. (SBU) Chernihiv's socio-economic-political profile defies easy categorization. Bordering both Russia and Belarus, Chernihiv province is roughly split between Russian speakers in the north and in the cities and Ukrainian speakers in the south, though the population near Belarus "speaks both languages with a Belarusian accent," joked deputy governor Volodymyr Tandura. Chernihiv is also a dying province, its largely rural current population of 1.2 million dropping quickly, with only 6-7000 annual births compared to 24-26,000 annual deaths, the worst ratio in Ukraine, according to Tandura, a former professor and university rector now responsible for social issues in the oblast administration. Chernihiv voted communist until the 2002 Rada elections, when Our Ukraine captured the anti-Kuchma protest vote.

16. (SBU) Both the CVU's Solomakha and "Sivershchina" (The Northern Lands) newspaper editor Petro Antonenko said that Chernihiv was fully in play for a range of parties in the March 26 parliamentary and local elections, and that there were no signs of the administrative resource abuses that had occurred in 2004. Our Ukraine, BYuT, the Socialists, Party of Regions, and the Communists would likely make it into the provincial Rada, with Rada Speaker Lytvyn's Bloc a possibility and the SPDU(o)-based Ne Tak bloc an outside shot. As with the nationwide race, no one party would win a majority, and a legislative coalition was inevitable. The race for Chernihiv mayor would be a toss-up between the non-affiliated incumbent, whom Regions had endorsed, Socialist MP Ruchkovsky, and a possible late Our Ukraine entry. Antonenko predicted that control of Chernihiv's 22 local district councils would vary widely, reflecting localized factors, including the strength and popularity of various district administrators, most of whom claimed allegiance to Our Ukraine, with a handful from BYuT, Kostenko's People's Party, and Lytvyn's Bloc.

17. (SBU) Antonenko noted with evident regret that the acrimonious autumn break-up of "Team Orange" and the continued sniping between the Yushchenko and Tymoshenko camps had damaged the overall level of "Orange" support in the province. Despite Yushchenko taking 71 percent of the Chernihiv vote in 2004, there was no guarantee that the combined share of votes for Our Ukraine, BYuT, and the Socialists would reach that level in March, Solomakha said, since part of the pro-Yushchenko vote in 2004, as had been the case in 2002, was really anti-Kuchma; he predicted that protest voters disappointed with the lack of progress in 2005 would likely shift to Regions, the Communists, Lytvyn or Ne Tak.

18. (SBU) Despite Solomakha and Antonenko's assessment that BYuT had a stronger Chernihiv organization than Our Ukraine, Our Ukraine had a dominant street presence during our February 13 visit, with nearly 10 Orange tents set up at various key intersections, staffed by pairs of orange-clad campaign workers handing out copies of the party newspaper, wallet-sized Our Ukraine calendars, and a glossy pamphlet detailing fulfillment of President Yushchenko's "Ten Points for the People" Presidential campaign platform. The only other street presence that we saw was a single Socialist tent, plus two mobile pickets from Natalya Vitrenko's Progressive Socialists/People's Opposition bloc protesting two separate NATO-related roundtables. Apart from one large Lytvyn Bloc billboard and two sidewalk "Ne Tak" panels promoting an anti-NATO, pro-Russia position, the billboards in and around Chernihiv city were split between Our Ukraine, BYuT, and PORA-Reforms and Order. Clumps of orange ribbons reminiscent of Yushchenko's 2004 Presidential campaign marked trees and thickets along much of the 100-plus miles between Chernihiv and Kiev, thanks to a January 29 Our Ukraine-sponsored commemoration of the 1919 Kruty massacre, when 300 young students died in an unsuccessful defense of the nascent independent Ukrainian state against an arriving Bolshevik army at the Kruty train station, Chernihiv province.

Orange Revolution's true legacy: change in attitudes

19. (SBU) Antonenko summed up the pre-election situation on an upbeat note: "Those who think the Orange Revolution happened only in Kiev on the Maidan are mistaken. We had our own Maidans all over Ukraine, including Chernihiv. Despite the disappointments of unfulfilled expectations of the past year, the real change endures in people's attitudes. People now truly understand what freedom is and know that those in power must respect and not ignore the people. This will not change, no matter who wins on March 26."

10. (U) Visit Embassy Kiev's classified website at:
www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/kiev.

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